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ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6732  
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHXQ/ALL EUROPEAN UNION POSTS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 002624

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: FOUR PARTIES SIGN ELECTORAL CODE OF  
CONDUCT WITH A SPLASH

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. After nearly three months of often tedious negotiation, four Ethiopian political parties -- including the ruling EPRDF -- have signed a preamble to a code of conduct (CoC) intended to govern the political campaign leading to the May 2010 parliamentary elections. Speaking at the October 30 signing ceremony, Prime Minister (and EPRDF Chairman) Meles Zenawi announced that the CoC would force all political parties to act in a way that will allow the elections to meet universal standards for fairness. Representatives of the three involved opposition parties -- AEUP, CUD, and EDP -- generally spoke of a sense of mutual trust that emerged from the lengthy negotiations. CUD spokesman Ayele Chamisso struck the only negative note when he alleged that the nonparticipation of the Forum opposition coalition put into question its commitment to democracy. The CoC itself will now be submitted to a standing committee in Parliament for enactment of implementing legislation. The CoC's preamble suggests that the negotiating group that produced it will be made permanent and will assume jurisdiction over grievances involving alleged mistreatment of party members and alleged misconduct on the National Electoral Board. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Four political parties, collectively accounting for 85 percent of the seats in the Ethiopian Parliament, have signed a five-page "preamble" to a "Joint Agreement on the Electoral Code of Conduct for Political Parties," intended to guide political behavior during the dawning campaign season leading to May 23, 2010 national elections. (NOTE. An English-language version of the preamble (e-mailed AF/E) was made available at the signing ceremony. The Code of Conduct (CoC) itself is nine pages and was not signed at the October 30 ceremony. Rather, it will be incorporated by reference into a 15-page proposed legislative package to be considered by the Ethiopian Parliament's standing committee on legislation. END NOTE.) Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, chairman of the ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), made a surprise appearance at the October 30 signing ceremony and addressed a Sheraton Hotel ballroom packed with Ethiopian and international dignitaries. Taking an expansive view of the effect the CoC will have on the campaign, Meles said: "(T)he document will force opposition parties to compete in the elections in a meaningful and legal manner only. It will force the ruling party to provide adequate, lawful, and impartial venues to opposition political parties. The adoption of the (CoC) is a great achievement as it will enable the ruling party and the opposition to compete in elections that fulfill democratic standards."

¶3. (SBU) All Ethiopian Union Party (AEUP) Chairman Hailu Shawel called the CoC "a great stride forward," adding that the negotiating process that produced its preamble had left the participating parties "looking at each other with trust in place of previous suspicion." A widely circulated photo from the signing ceremony had Meles shaking hands with Hailu,

who was controversially jailed and sentenced to life in prison (later pardoned) upon being convicted of attempting to overthrow the government by force in the aftermath of the 2005 elections.

¶4. (SBU) The chairmen of the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) and the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) -- both technically opposition parties but largely in step with EPRDF policy -- were similarly full of praise for the CoC. CUD Chairman Ayele Chamisso had the only negative comment of the 30-minute signing ceremony. Referring to the opposition Forum for Democratic Dialogue (Forum), Ayele said its nonparticipation called into question its commitment to democracy, and he called on the Forum's eight constituent parties to re-engage.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT. The Ethiopian Partners Group (EPG) of foreign missions in Addis Ababa originally proposed that Ethiopian political parties adopt an electoral code of conduct, and the three-month interparty process that yielded the CoC preamble is testament to the seriousness with which at least these four parties take international community opinion. Political hyperbole aside, however, the signing of a CoC preamble does little of itself to ensure free and fair elections. Although the signing of the preamble is a welcome piece of rare good news on the Ethiopian political scene, it is very modest. There remain daunting procedural and substantive questions: Will these four parties and other important players (including the National Electoral Board (NEB)) manage to draft a consensus legislative package to give the CoC the force of law?; Will the negotiating group (now dubbed the "Joint Council") evolve into a body with real

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capacity and jurisdiction to deliberate over thorny questions involving political prisoners and NEB misconduct, as envisioned vaguely in paragraph 16-17 of the preamble)?; How will the EPRDF-controlled police and judicial structures react to what could amount to parallel Joint Council jurisdiction over claims of official misconduct? Stay Tuned.  
MUSHINGI